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**COLD WAR IN
WARM WATERS:**

**Reflections on
Australian and
French Mutual
Misunderstandings
in the Pacific**



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Introduction

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s, France's presence, and especially French nuclear testing in the South Pacific region was a source of friction and occasional crises in French-Australian relations.¹

That period was also one of considerable transformation, with decolonisation, the Cold War, the push towards nuclear disarmament, and, more recently, the growing importance of regional alliances of different types (economic, political, military) in the wake of post-Cold War depolarisation.

The occasionally very strained relations between France and Australia during that period reflected those changes in a manner that is particularly revealing of the two countries' difficulties in finding their place in a rapidly changing world. Indeed, like all nations, both France and Australia have had to reconsider their positions on the international scene, and in the process, to reconstruct their self-images, while not necessarily liking the image of themselves mirrored in the other's criticisms.

Today, both Australian and French diplomatic sources assure me that relations between the two countries are perfectly serene. To quote the Secretary of State for French Overseas Territories, Jean-Jack Queyranne, speaking on the present state of co-operation between France and the South Pacific countries during his June 1999 visit to New Zealand, "the cold war in warm waters ... is a thing of the past".² Nevertheless, this does not mean that mutual misunderstandings do not subsist. Indeed, this should come as no

surprise, since the roots of this mistrust can be traced back to the early days of colonisation in the South Pacific.

The Historical Background

The European drive to expand throughout the known world began with Magellan's navigation of the "Great Ocean" in 1520-21, and grew with the exploration of America, Asia, and Africa. In Oceania European expansionism reached a climax at the end of the eighteenth century, and above all in the nineteenth century. Colonial domination grew at the same pace as the rivalry and competition between the ruling countries of the time: Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, and the United States. Colonial dominions multiplied rapidly, with military conquests, partitions, trade-offs, buy-backs, and transfers, and the region found itself divided into separate colonial sub-regions.

The traditional competition between France and Britain saw early settlement of the Pacific, with the English occupation of New South Wales in 1788 and New Zealand in 1840; the establishment of the French protectorate of Polynesia as of the 1840s; and the French annexation of the main island of New Caledonia in 1853.

Now, although the historical access to Australia from Europe was across the Indian Ocean, and because European settlement started on the eastern side of the Australian continent, nineteenth-century Australian colonists naturally turned to the Pacific when they began to look beyond Australia's shores for external opportunities. They soon came to identify strongly with the Pacific region, to the point of thinking of it not merely as "their neighbourhood," but as "their own backyard" — a somewhat extravagant notion which France was to ridicule whenever it was

invoked in connection with Australian protests against French nuclear testing in Polynesia.

For the handful of Europeans living in the antipodean colonies in the nineteenth century, the Pacific represented the source of a potential threat. But the threat was posed not by their closest neighbours (generally under the control of European nations), nor even from more distant countries such as China or Japan, since those countries were considered as lacking the military resources, and indeed the will, to launch an attack against them. What the colonists dreaded most was the covetousness of the most advanced nations with regard to the large number of Pacific islands and archipelagos that had yet to be annexed or conquered.

Among those nations, France appeared as chief bogey-man to Australian colonists, duplicating Britain's fear of Napoleon's greed. The main fear was that France would lay claim to those parts of the Australian continent on which the colonists had not yet completely established their hold. The occupation of Tasmania in 1803 and of Western Australia a few years later was in fact an attempt to forestall France's real or imagined plans in this regard.

Those fears were not unfounded. Conquest was undoubtedly envisaged by France as a possible option (though it was never a priority). The exhibition on Baudin's 1800-04 expedition to Australia held at the National Library in Canberra in July-October 1999 ("Terre Napoleon, Australia through French Eyes") displayed a copy of a report by Péron unambiguously entitled "Of the Means for France to Retain England's Southern Colonies after Their Conquest". The report included detailed drawings of the fortifications of Sydney, demonstrating that even this supposedly purely scientific

venture included a strategic reconnaissance of Sydney with the aim of providing Napoleon with a plan of invasion.

To put things in a wider perspective, however, it must be added that Sydney was an imperially contested site at the time, and not only French, but Russian, Spanish and American visitors, all appraised Sydney strategically in their turn.

At the same time, Péron had personal ambitions and unquestionably hoped that his show of zeal would earn him his Emperor's favour. France also had more serious plans to establish a penal colony on the Botany Bay model in Western Australia or in New Zealand. Those plans eventually fell through, but they do show France's definite interest in the region.

Once the whole of Australia was formally occupied, the settlers became concerned about France's imperialistic designs in the Pacific, an ocean that they privately felt ought to come under British control, so that they might feel fully protected and safe.

As it happened, despite its efforts, France failed to establish a foothold in New Zealand, where Britain got in first. But when the French made Tahiti a protectorate in 1844, and annexed New Caledonia in 1853, Australian colonists vehemently voiced their protest, on the grounds that such intrusions posed a threat to their security and commercial interests.

France only has now to get a footing in Tonga, and she will have formed a chain of posts between the British colonies in Australia and New Zealand and the northern regions of the Pacific,

the *Sydney Morning Herald* complained in November 1853, as if Australia and New Zealand were about to find themselves completely isolated, hemmed in by that

*rival nation, whose aims and objects [were] so dissimilar, not to say opposite, to those which [had] for many years been earnestly contemplated by the most intelligent colonists of Australia and of New Zealand.*³

This assessment of the situation could only have been either paranoid or disingenuous. With the exception of New Caledonia, France's possessions in the Pacific were some seven thousand kilometres away, and hardly formed the ominous "chain" described by the *Herald*. Besides, there was no reason to be overly suspicious, considering that France had other fish to fry, both at home and abroad. The 1815-80 period in France was characterised by the instability of the central state, and the priority given to European policy. The weight of France's colonial enterprise was borne in Africa and Indochina rather than Oceania, and indeed, the list of French failures in the Pacific was much longer than that of French conquests in the region.

Arguably, the colonists' overwrought anxieties and the anti-French sentiment that went with them were merely symptoms of the deep-rooted feeling of insecurity that plagued Australian settlers for years — and which the Australian population perhaps has yet to rid itself of completely.

Contradictions of Australian Identity

For a very long time, Australians were convinced that because of their specific circumstances (geographic isolation, size of the continent, meagre population) they were unable to defend themselves and must therefore rely on the protection of a "Great Power" (Britain, later the US) for their security and prosperity. But even in the nineteenth century when they had no foreign policy of their own, the Australian colonies did not hesitate to take a number of initiatives when it was felt that Britain had failed to deliver in the region.

Such was the case in 1883 when Queensland's Premier, Thomas McIlwraith, fearing the invasion of New Guinea by Germany, dispatched a police officer to formally declare the island a British possession. The annexation was disowned by the British government, which went back on its decision a year later and declared part of the island a British protectorate, thereby making it possible for Germany to move in and annex the remaining part of the island, to the colonists' fury.

What is interesting to note is that Australian public opinion at the time, as reflected in particular in the press, frequently gave the impression that serious differences existed between the colonies and the mother-country in matters of foreign policy. In fact, this is misleading, since Britain, having learnt its lesson from American independence, was usually sufficiently cautious as to take its colonies' grievances into consideration, if only to ensure their loyalty.

What must be underlined here is the fact that at a time when "Australian" identity was considered entirely consistent with, and

even dependent upon, British attachments, colonists did not hesitate to voice their dissatisfaction with Britain in matters of foreign policy that concerned their immediate periphery, namely to the area to which they felt they belonged. For the rest, Australian colonists saw no contradiction in being colonisers, themselves under the domination of their imperial power; they were proud of being of British stock and never thought twice about sending volunteers to join imperial forces in conflicts that were of little direct concern to them (to crush indigenous rebellion in New Zealand or Sudan, or to fight the Boers in South Africa, for instance).

France was quick to point out the inconsistencies of this historical two-tiered allegiance when it was accused of imperialism by Australia in recent years. One of its favourite retorts was to say that Australians had themselves been zealous supporters of British imperialism in the past; that they had not disdained casting covetous glances at neighbouring islands; and that on their own territory, their treatment of the indigenous population had hardly been a model of democratic benevolence.

It is undoubtedly the case that Australia was not in the best position to teach France lessons in this regard — nor, let us add immediately, was France in the best position to lecture Australia. But those considerations in turn hinge upon a fundamental point on which the two countries have had conflicting views: the sense of the legitimacy of their presence in the region.

Who “Belongs” in the Pacific?

The inhabitants and governments of Pacific nations have a clear definition of what it is that makes a nation a “true Pacific nation”. As the late Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou explained to his

Caldoche opponent Jacques Lafleur, “We belong here and nowhere else; you belong here but you also belong somewhere else,”⁴ by which he meant that to Pacific islanders, a true Pacific islander is not just a native but an aboriginal. “Belonging” in the Pacific region is therefore conceived of as immemorial and exclusive.

Such strict ethnic and cultural criteria do not apply to Australia and New Zealand, whose indigenous populations were overruled or decimated, and whose present populations are predominantly of European origin — even if, as we have just seen, the latter’s sense of belonging to the region goes back to early colonial days. Why, then, are those two countries recognised as acceptable neighbours, and not mere outsiders like France?

This is where geopolitical considerations come into account. Australia and New Zealand’s geographic position undoubtedly makes them part of the South Pacific. Even more importantly, they are the biggest and most powerful countries in the region. Their respective populations are far larger than those of any of the Pacific micro-states with their combined total population of a mere six million;⁵ they hold most of the economic, intellectual and military levers in the area; they are the biggest providers of foreign aid; and their historical anchorage in the Western world puts them in a position to speak on its behalf on the international scene if need be. Clearly, it would have been impossible to envisage the building of the South Pacific entity without them, and the cohesion of the region still largely rests on Australia and New Zealand’s “pale” leadership.

The above-cited criteria governing Pacific identity or “belonging” do not apply to France either — but then France never claimed to be a South Pacific nation. On the contrary, what it has

claimed is that France's Overseas Territories (Territoires d'Outre-Mer, or TOMs) in the Pacific are part of the French Republic, in accordance with their populations' free democratic choice.

The French Overseas Territories in the Pacific: An Empire or a Free Voluntary Association?

It is indeed the case that in 1958, faced with increased pressure for complete decolonisation, President de Gaulle gave France's Overseas Territories the option of full independence or association with France, with a status roughly comparable to that of British dominions, including a large degree of local autonomy, the metropole (the term preferred to that of "mother country")⁶ retaining control over defence, foreign and economic policy. Only Guinea opted for independence at first, to be followed later by most of the African members of the so-called "French Community".

In any case, the Pacific Overseas Territories stayed, and France's view is that no one is entitled to question the democratic right of peoples to decide for themselves (*"Le droit des peuples à disposer d'eux-mêmes"*). The French Republic, therefore, is wherever a people has chosen to be part of it. When it was suggested to France that the Massif Central or Corsica were geologically suitable sites for nuclear testing and that it should carry out its tests "on French territory," France argued quite logically that French Polynesia *was* French territory — through the choice of its own population, what's more.

There is also a sentimental dimension to take into account. As late as 1987, former Ambassador to Australia Bernard Folin declared with regard to New Caledonia,

You cannot understand why we say that New Caledonia is part of France. It is part of France because in our minds, in our history, and even in our very constitution, we have worked towards the goal of assimilating those peoples. You cannot abandon a part of France, a part of your family.⁷

This may sound misguided, even a touch pathetic, but it does reveal the French people's attachment to the legacy of their revolutionary forebears. By choosing voluntarily to remain within the French Republic, France's Pacific TOMs are supposed to have chosen to adhere to what the French Revolution saw as universal values — liberty, equality, fraternity, and a number of others. Thus the idea of a "civilising mission" for the nation that saw itself as "the nation of human rights," in the days when "civilisation" was thought to progress according to a linear pattern towards absolute perfection and refinement. Everyone, it was thought, ought to benefit from the "republican" enlightenment provided through France's agency.

Contrary to what a number of critics have claimed, therefore, the TOM statute is more than just a crafty constitutional device for allowing France to retain what an Australian editorialist called "an impressive empire upon which the sun never sets"⁸ — a description rather out of proportion for a string of confetti, even if, admittedly, they are strategically distributed around the globe.

The French Republican Ideal in the Colonies: Flaws and Ambiguities

There were instances of France's "republican ideal" reaching some degree of completion. For example, this ideal made it possible for an African, Ivory Coast's Félix Houphouët-Boigny, to become a

minister in all successive French governments from 1956 to 1959, until he became president of his own newly independent country in 1960 — a unique example from European colonial history.

More often, however, this ideal simply proved detrimental. Because it aimed at establishing a standard, homogeneous, “perfect” model, it was assimilationist by nature. It was first imposed in France itself at the expense of regional cultures and languages; it is still largely imposed on immigrants today, not without a degree of damage. It never really served its idealistic purpose in French colonies — where, incidentally, school-children, whatever their ethnic origin, were “universally” taught that their ancestors were the Gauls. It was too early to consider the idea that “universal” values might not be universal at all, but very much a western construct, and that trying to impose those values, even candidly, could prove a destructive, rather than constructive, enterprise.

While the concept of universal values may have blinded the well-meaning, it was inevitably put to use by the unscrupulous to establish their own domination. Colonisation goes along with racism, and in the case of France the “universality” of liberty, equality and fraternity did not necessarily extend to colonised populations.

Among the worst examples in this connection was New Caledonia where, very much like the Australian case, the convenient Social Darwinistic belief in the natural marginalisation of “primitive” natives and in the inevitability of their ultimate extinction led to their “confinement” — to use the official term — in reservations, the enforcement of discriminatory indigenous legislation (the *Indigénat*, in force from 1887 to 1946), and the

importing of contract labourers from elsewhere, since Melanesians were thought unfit to contribute to France's colonial enterprise ("*œuvre coloniale*"). In the words of Marc Le Goupils, a white settler who lived in New Caledonia from 1894 to 1904,

*The Kanakas [were to] disappear without having understood why the white race had settled among them, or on what terms they intend[ed] to live with them.*⁹

A commonly shared view was that the "civilised" and the "primitive" could not co-exist on the same soil. According to H. L. Rivière, a military officer who conducted the suppression of the 1878 Kanak insurrection, a conquered people either became assimilated by its conqueror or disappeared. In Rivière's opinion, "those races of America or Oceania, be they black or copper-skinned [could] not be absorbed" because of their "instinctive customs that had never progressed."¹⁰

The irony is that the development of a truly Kanak political consciousness in the second half of the twentieth century was to combine the desire to preserve customary values (attachment to the land, the rules of collective life, the strength of ancestral cultural experience) with borrowings from Christianity (the notion of human dignity), and those French republican values (liberty, equality, human and social rights) from which they had never benefited. In particular, Kanak leaders retained from French "democratic" practice the idea that written law, guaranteed by the representativeness of elected assemblies, could be a rampart against injustice and abuse. They were to pay a high toll for consistently trying to have the law equitably enforced in their struggle for the recognition of their rights.

All in all, the main flaw of the French “Republican” model was that it was essentially political, rather than cultural, and as such too narrowly institutional. All it managed to do in the case of the Pacific was to isolate France’s territories from the rest of the region, within a Franco-French context, and with little room for relationships with the island nations geographically and culturally close to them.

French “Arrogance” in the Pacific: A Valid Criticism?

It was therefore little wonder that the French republican model should have been perceived by many as an expression of France’s “inflated” and “outdated” claim to “grandeur”. Yet it seems that until very recently, France was largely unaware of the effects of such a narrow approach, as demonstrated by its indignant reactions to accusations of imperialism in the region.

In fact, there is very little difference between the TOMs and other Pacific territories under the friendly influence of other nations. The United States retains its own territories in the Pacific: Hawaii was incorporated as a US state in 1959; the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas has US Commonwealth status; and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau have all signed “Compacts of Free Association” with the US. Niue, the Cook Islands, and Tokelau are freely associated with New Zealand, while the Christmas Islands, Cocos Islands, Coral Sea Islands, Heard and McDonald, Lord Howe, Macquarie, and Norfolk Islands have the status of Australian territory. Yet only the retention of French sovereignty in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna appeared anachronistic and objectionable.

To France this was unfair, and it raged about the double standard. But then, apart from its rather heedless use of the “Republican model,” no other power seems to have become so entangled in the ambiguous meshing of its domestic and foreign policies in the region, understandably giving ground to accusations of arrogance.

A Nuclear-Free Pacific: In Whose Interests?

The administration of France’s South Pacific territories was France’s domestic business, and France was founded in objecting to other countries suggesting how this should be done. Nuclear testing, however, was part of France’s defence and diplomatic policies — no longer a purely domestic concern. In spite of the precautions taken by the successive governments, the domestic and foreign spheres became highly permeable, and this inevitably aroused protest. Indeed, from the early 1960s onwards, it proved impossible for representatives of the French state to entertain bilateral relations with the South Pacific without reference being made to French actions in the TOMs: nuclear testing in Polynesia, and in the wake of nuclear testing, the situation in New Caledonia (with intensive mining but little redistribution of wealth to the Kanaks, the Kanaks having been made a minority in New Caledonia through metropolitan immigration).

In fact, the French failed to take the full measure of the complexity of the political game played by the other nations of the region. Hostility to France was a central factor in that game, which remained very opaque to France — if France was ever particularly interested in trying to decipher it.

To a large extent, the almost unanimous opposition to French nuclear testing in the Pacific was a catalytic element in the federation of local interests. By bringing their differences with France onto the international scene, Pacific island states were able to conceal their own differences on economic, political and even territorial matters, at a time when they wanted the rest of world to accept their conception of a specific regional identity and to acknowledge their right to make their own decisions. In the meantime, to make the regional game even more intricate, Australia and New Zealand's stance on French nuclear testing in Polynesia and "colonialism" in New Caledonia was also a way for these two countries to secure their regional legitimacy and leadership.

As far as Australia was concerned, there were also more serious considerations, linked to its own defence. Partly out of genuine conviction, and partly to assert its role as a regional leader, Australia had been riding the anti-nuclear wave for some years. By the 1980s, South Pacific countries had widely come to favour the idea of a "nuclear-free Pacific," and "nuclear-free" sentiment was growing, both because of French testing and in connection with the wider fear of a nuclear war in the context of the Cold War.

Yet Australia could not afford to let things get out of hand, because the "nuclear-free" idea might ultimately imperil American strategic interests in the region, undermining the ANZUS alliance, and hence Australia's security. If the South Pacific island states were to declare themselves nuclear-free, as Vanuatu did in 1982, the US Navy would no longer be able to enter national ports under its policy of neither confirming nor denying that any particular ship was nuclear-powered or carrying nuclear weapons.

Australia's concerns about the risks which anti-nuclear feeling posed for ANZUS were confirmed in 1984 when New Zealand banned nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered ships from its waters, precipitating a crisis in the alliance. The United States cut intelligence links with New Zealand, withdrew from joint naval exercises, and eventually bluntly declared that its defence commitments to New Zealand no longer applied. Washington feared that other countries might follow New Zealand's example, and that anti-nuclear policies might spread "if foreign left-wing governments [were] able to assuage their left-wing-anti-nuclear radicals at the expense of the US Navy cost-free"¹¹.

Australia was then forced to take a stand, and it chose to avoid affronting the United States. Although it shared New Zealand's dislike of things nuclear, regardless of the traditional links between the two countries, and in spite of the political kinship between the Lange and Hawke governments, Australia opted for a compromise solution that would safeguard US military interests in the region.

On the home front, the Australian Prime Minister was just as anxious to prevent the anti-nuclear sentiment from degenerating into animosity towards Australia's great and powerful nuclear-armed friend. The solution devised by Bob Hawke was for Australia to propose its own nuclear-free zone, i.e. one that would serviceably direct international and domestic attention towards the French and away from the Americans. Anti-French propaganda was therefore used as a smokescreen to safeguard what remained of the ANZUS alliance.

Just as Bob Hawke had intended, the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty adopted by the South Pacific Forum in 1985, the

Rarotonga Treaty, was a limited one which made a mockery of the “nuclear-free” concept. The signatories undertook not to make, possess or station nuclear weapons, and not to help other countries carry out nuclear testing. But nothing was said about US activities in the South Pacific, the movements of nuclear-armed vessels and aircraft in the region, the testing of missiles, or the export of uranium. Australia’s “qualified nuclearism” did not impress such island states as Vanuatu, which rightly regarded it as mere hypocrisy.

The Australian Conception of Defence

Of course, no country can be blamed for giving priority to its own territorial security. On this occasion, however, another source of misunderstanding between France and Australia may well have been due to their very different conceptions of defence. In the second half of the twentieth century France’s *cavalier seul* approach stood in sharp contrast to Australia’s devoted reliance on the protection of great and powerful friends.

Because of its colonial past, its vastness, and its relatively small population, Australia has always felt in need of a military protector. Britain played that part until the Second World War, and the United States has played it since. While it is certainly much cheaper for Australia to rely on a guardian than to provide for its own defence, this puts it in the unenviable position of a dependent ward, with doubtful benefits, like an orphaned country cousin in a Dickens novel, or, more elegantly, like a “dependent ally,” to borrow Coral Bell’s phrase.

Historically, Australia has wavered between two approaches — “forward defence” and “continental defence”. The doctrine of

forward defence — which was the more influential of the two in the twentieth century — rests on the idea that Australia would be unable to defend itself if attacked on its own territory. The rationale behind the concept of forward defence, therefore, is that any threat to Australia arising beyond its shores should not be allowed to reach the national territory but should be checked immediately at its source, or as close to it as possible. This task could not be undertaken by Australia alone, because Australian troops would not be numerous enough to play a decisive role by themselves. Consequently they would have to join the much larger forces of a powerful ally on the overseas battlefield — to “join them,” not to “be joined by them,” — as if Australia had no major objection to military alliances being a one-way affair.

Indeed, “forward defence” has often been perverted into subordination to the protector of the day, and the rewards have been uncertain. Australia has only been directly threatened by enemy forces once in its entire history: by the Japanese during World War II. Yet Australian troops have fought in countless offshore theatres of war. The supposed “threat” to Australia’s security in these cases was usually far removed or even non-existent. The Boer uprisings in South Africa at the turn of the century, or the Communist insurrection in Vietnam in the 1960s, for instance, can hardly be said to have jeopardised Australia’s territorial integrity.

In fact, Australia has always gone to war not to defend itself in any real sense, but in order to keep its protectors happy, in the hope of being rewarded for its good deed and helped in return at time of peril in the future. The fall of Singapore in 1942 was a painful demonstration of Britain’s ingratitude, and as Australia is well aware, the South Pacific does not currently have a vital

strategic relevance to the USA. Nevertheless, Australian governments have tended to consider that it is injudicious to pursue policies to which their protectors might object, instead of taking their own stand — and have lost a good deal of credibility in the process.

For the supporters of “continental defence,” on the other hand, Australia should not get involved in foreign wars, but should confine its military forces to the task of defending Australian territory and its immediate maritime surrounds. The 1986 Dobb Report (which provided the basis for the 1987 White Paper on Defence) and the 1990 Wrigley Report both favoured continental over forward defence, arguing that Australia should concentrate on the area which is of direct military interest to it, namely, its immediate neighbourhood.

Today, Australia still appears to hesitate between the two doctrines, and even tries to combine them on the grounds that forward defence and continental defence are at either end of the defence policy spectrum, and that they have never been mutually exclusive but are in fact complementary. The 1997 White Paper “In the National Interest” thus indicated that Australia should focus on the defence of its territory and strategic interests, but should also take into account the fact that the country’s security was bound up with regional stability. The three key features of Australia’s defence policy as defined by the White Paper were: maintaining a strong national defence capability; preserving the ANZUS Alliance relationship with the US; and expanding bilateral and multilateral regional security links.

In spite of this, the recent East Timor crisis has yet again highlighted Australia’s self-imposed subservience to the United

States. While international public opinion was generally favourably impressed by Major-General Cosgrove's no-nonsense approach as commander of INTERFET, Australian Prime Minister John Howard ruined the effect with his enthusiastic "doctrine" which, in substance, would see Australia becoming Uncle Sam's "deputy sheriff" in Asia, terminating the idea of special relationships in the region. Howard's statements on this issue outraged Australia's Asian neighbours as arrogant and racist, aroused much criticism at home, and unquestionably sent a message to the rest of the world that Australia was unable to imagine itself as anything better than being the proxy of the US.

To the outsider, such lack of self-confidence can only appear as a manifestation of the proverbial "cultural cringe". France's post-war insistence on steering away as much as it could from its Anglo-Saxon allies stands in complete contrast to Australia's attitude over the same period. Yet, France's splendid isolation was also a way of dealing with an inferiority complex, and had more to do with restoring French self-esteem than with achieving "grand designs," as some critics have insisted.¹²

Nuclear Testing in the Pacific: The French Perspective

France's mistake in the South Pacific, then, was largely to try and play its own solitary game. But it is essential to understand why nuclear testing was considered so important to French governments. Once again, there was a gulf between the way in which France's actions were perceived and the genuine grounds for these actions.

To France, nuclear testing — or, more accurately, the idea that it should have a *force de frappe* — was central, but this was

not, as the clichés would have it, because of a direct megalomaniac filiation running from Napoleon, through de Gaulle to Chirac. On the contrary, the French attitude towards nuclear testing was the consequence of the humiliation felt after the defeat of 1940, the subsequent occupation by Nazi Germany, and the distasteful collaboration of the Vichy regime. More importantly, it was the consequence of the even greater humiliation of being treated as a second-class partner by its closest allies — Britain and the US — who, in their wartime deliberations, systematically planned the future shape of Europe as though France should have no role in it at all (the original “Anglo-Saxon plot”).

France’s assessment of the Second World War was twofold. On the one hand, France had been defeated by Germany because it had not kept pace with the development of military technology. On the other, its “Anglo-Saxon” allies had not provided the kind of support which France had expected from them. The logical conclusion was that France should make sure that it could defend itself independently, and hence, in the geostrategic context of the time, that it should develop its own nuclear defence and deterrent.

This was no mere question of honour, glory, magnificence, and prestige. What was at stake was France’s place in the world’s decision-making processes; in other words, its survival as a nation whose opinion would not be discounted — in short, its right not to have to submit to the *diktats* of other nations, least of all its allies. Thus the dogged, inflexible commitment with which the successive French governments developed France’s nuclear deterrent force — certainly to the annoyance of France’s “Anglo-Saxon” partners, but often also against the prevailing public opinion in France itself.

All in all, and irritating as some may find this, the obstinacy of successive French governments paid off, helping France achieve a position that allowed its partners little choice but to accept France as a full participant in major decision-making processes. President Mitterrand justified this position as late as the mid-1980s, explaining that “France [had] committed herself to nuclear energy through a survival reflex, and in order not to allow others to have empire over the earth”. France itself, he added, did not aspire to “have empire over the earth,” but “intend[ed] to remain mistress of her choices, and first of all of that on which all others depend: peace or war.”¹³ In other words, French nuclear power was about the defence of France’s own “republican” right to self-determination.

With the end of the Cold War, the ideological and political justifications that had sustained France’s deterrence strategy were becoming less relevant, and eventually obsolete. Moreover, the obvious failures in intelligence, communications and logistics during the Gulf War led to a major rethinking of French defence policy. The 1994 White Paper on Defence (*Livre Blanc sur la Défense 1994*) — the first one published in two decades — emphasised the use of conventional rather than nuclear forces, and shifted the focus of military research from the nuclear field to space technologies. France also opened a debate about re-entering NATO’s military command, from which it had withdrawn in 1966. Major defence restructuring was announced in February 1996 with the *Loi de Programmation Militaire 1997-2002*, including the abolition of compulsory military service, the withdrawal of overseas forces, and a new emphasis on integration with Europe. Much remains to be done in the latter field, however. If Europe is redefining its security, as well as its economic and social structures, the continuing US hegemony over the Atlantic Alliance has been a source of tension

both between Europe and the US and among Europeans themselves, as demonstrated in the cases of Bosnia, the Middle East, or more recently, Kosovo. If things have changed on the question of defence, France continues to insist that its voice be heard and its *différence* be taken into account with regard to other issues such as world trade, intellectual property, and culture — yet again, to the irritation of many.

It would of course be sheer provocation to suggest, by way of conclusion to the above, that since it had the raw material handy and suitable testing sites in the vicinity of Maralinga or the Monte Bello Islands, Australia, like France, ought to have developed its own nuclear weaponry in order to become less dependent on others in matters of defence. At any rate, that political option was not taken up, and whether it would have been desirable is a difficult question. Let it be noted, however, that the harbouring of British nuclear testing in South Australia and off the coast of Western Australia between 1952 and 1967 was a clear indication that Australians must have seen some virtue in the concept of nuclear deterrence at the time.

As mentioned earlier, Franco-Australian political relations have improved tremendously in recent years. French nuclear testing has ceased for good. France has ratified the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Armaments, and has committed itself to a policy of decolonisation in New Caledonia, and to a lesser extent in Polynesia. Australia even considers the French presence to be a stabilising element in the South Pacific region nowadays.

But diplomacy and public opinion are two separate things. Undoubtedly, the 1995-96 crisis prompted by the resumption of France's nuclear testing was a good example of the ways in which

public opinion, informed by a poor understanding of the situation and a degree of manipulation by the media and certain interest groups, can influence diplomatic relations and embarrass governments.

The 1995-96 Crisis

On 13 June 1995, President Chirac announced that France would carry out a further eight nuclear tests in the Pacific between September 1995 and May 1996. This was no surprise, since the conservative victory in the French presidential elections had been widely predicted, and as a candidate Chirac had made no secret of his intention to resume nuclear testing. Once he assumed the presidency, it was merely a matter of his setting a date. But the Australian political class did not anticipate the strength of public response to the news; it was largely taken off-guard and forced to follow, rather than to lead.

The initial response of the Australian government was low-key. Foreign Minister Gareth Evans even highlighted the positive aspects of the French announcement, namely, that France was committed to a limited test series and to signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. The Opposition approved.

Not so the public. The Australian media scented blood, and taking their cues from the initial reactions on 14 June, sensed that this could become a major national issue — and one that was bound to boost sales (they are commercial ventures, after all). The media expected a strong reaction, and they got one. They then proceeded to fuel the situation with a succession of juicy, simplistic, and often grossly unprofessional one-sided reports, so that public anger and media coverage came to feed on each other, performing a very

interesting *pas-de-deux*. The story had all the right ingredients: the bad guys contaminating the environment, and the patriotic good guys trying to stop them. Moreover, with Greenpeace's and other protest movements' knack for creating infotainment media events, it was certain that there was going to be an abundant supply of adequately dramatic pictures.

Next to no mention was made by the Australian media of French opposition to the resumption of nuclear testing. Instead, the impression was created that the French people were solidly behind their government on this issue, which was far from being the case. Opinion polls showed consistently that around 60 percent of the French population disapproved of the resumption of the tests. Many resented the fact that President Chirac had discredited France's word by going back on his predecessor's undertaking, unnecessarily causing international protest, and setting a very poor example for supposedly "less responsible" nuclear powers such as China. A 1994 poll conducted by *Le Monde* had indicated that 75 percent of the French thought that France should not resume nuclear testing so long as other countries refrained from doing so.

The resumption of nuclear testing also brought ridicule upon the French military, whose researchers appeared to have been unable to produce suitable computer models which could have removed the need for the tests. Nor were French tax-payers particularly happy to see more of their money going on what had been described as outdated experimentation in the *White Paper on Defence* a year earlier.

The traditional French consensus on foreign policy was seriously disrupted by the tests, with almost unanimous opposition from the political left. Many perceived the resumption of nuclear

testing in the Pacific as clumsy, futile domestic political gesticulation on the theme of “departing from fourteen years of socialist rule” developed during Chirac’s presidential election campaign, and the new president’s popularity plummeted accordingly.

But honest information was not the name of the game for the Australian media. As the *Australian Financial Review* put it, Australia’s “major newspapers ha[d] essentially treated [the issue] not as one imposing on them a duty of public information and education, but, as usual, as a mere occasion for populist political entertainment.”¹⁴

What was extraordinary was not the public protest as such, but the fact that in a country that rightly prides itself on its multicultural record, the associated anger should have blown so far out of proportion, degenerating into an ugly hysterical outburst of racist passion and nationalistic fury.

Anti-French feeling reached new heights of absurdity in one Brisbane suburb where it reportedly caused the death of at least one “French” poodle.¹⁵ “French” polishers were the victims of abuse, and people driving French cars were insulted. Playwright Bob Ellis got away with offensive racist descriptions of the attributes of the “typical” Frenchman:

*pot belly, green skin, stubble, limp cigarette on long wet underlip, unlit but somehow dribbling ash in acres down the pendant clothing, large and serviceable penis, limp handshake.*¹⁶

Apart from such moronic defilement of all things French or French-sounding, there were more classical means of protest such as mass demonstrations, petitions, boycotts of French

goods and services, union action, and so on. The French flag was symbolically burned at demonstrations in Brisbane and Sydney. No less symbolically, a group of protesters dumped manure outside the French Embassy in Canberra, leading the French Ambassador Dominique Girard, to comment on its “ecological uses” in the agricultural field.¹⁷

Acts of violence were not uncommon. Many French cars were vandalised. French patisseries and restaurants had their windows smashed. The most serious incident was the fire bombing of the French Consulate in Perth, which practically destroyed the adjacent medical practice of the Honorary Consul of France, Robert Pearce, a plastic surgeon. Indirectly, the incident was an embarrassment to the New South Wales Fire Brigade Employees Union, which had instructed its members not to fight fires on the premises of the French Consulate in Sydney. The union immediately lifted the ban, admitting that they had never imagined that anyone would actually go so far as to attack French consular premises. . .

What particularly infuriated French officials was that the ubiquitous fury should have been directed exclusively at the French, while the Chinese were conducting nuclear tests in Lop Nor during the very same period (in May and August 1995). The Australian government, it must be acknowledged, dutifully condemned China after each of its two nuclear tests, which were described by Paul Keating as “a serious threat to world peace”.¹⁸

Logically, Australians should have been equally angry at the Chinese and at the French — but they were not. No one dumped manure in front of the Chinese Embassy; bans were not imposed on Chinese goods; Chinese Australians were not abused; the windows

of Chinese shops were not smashed — and no chow or Pekingese was reported missing.

Why, then, was Australian public opinion directed so strongly against France, rather than China? A large part of the answer is surely connected with the perception that the French were carrying out their tests in Australia's "backyard" — this despite the fact that Mururoa is located some seven thousand kilometres from the nearest Australian coast, while the Chinese testing grounds are roughly one thousand kilometres closer to Australia than Mururoa. Somehow actual distances have little to do with the perception of proximity. At those times when the Chinese were seen as potential invaders, China was certainly felt to be "closer," but in 1995, the "Yellow Peril" was no longer imminent, and Polynesia appeared to be next-door, while China did not.

The concerns about the environment and the health of local populations violently expressed over French testing in Polynesia, were not voiced against China. Probably only a handful of Australians would have had any idea of where Lop Nor was. In any case, few cared to know who the local people were; whether they had been colonised and subdued; how close to the testing site they lived; whether their health was affected; or what damage was being done to the environment. (Incidentally, the same could also be said of the Australian lack of interest in Russian nuclear testing in Kazakhstan.)

Rational explanations for this anti-French bias are hard to find. Of course, nuclear testing had been a bone of contention between the two countries since the mid-1960s, and resentment against France had thus been accumulating in Australia for a whole generation. Episodes such as the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior* in

1985 had contributed little to improving France's image, and the resumption of nuclear testing in 1995 was received as a fresh provocation.

France was also widely seen as "arrogant," and as having pretensions above its station. Now, rightly or wrongly — probably wrongly — it was generally accepted that the "real" great powers, that is, the United States, Russia, and China, could accumulate new weapon systems, use force against their neighbours, and bully smaller powers. But since France was not a "great power," behaviour remotely similar on its part was condemned as unacceptable. To the more idealistic, neither nuclear testing nor French "colonialism" in the Pacific — nor, for that matter, French interventions in Africa and French arms trading — were seen as being compatible with the values of civilisation and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity which France claimed to embody.

At the same time, Australian anti-French sentiment may well have been somewhat atavistic, an imported version of "standard British prejudices" and of the age-old enmity between the English and the French, dating to the time of Agincourt or even earlier. The French are all too familiar with the periodic flurries of Francophobia in the British tabloids (most recently, in connection with the French ban on British beef). The same old corny xenophobic insults invariably crop up time and again in the British popular press. All things considered, there was no novelty whatsoever in the Australian anti-French reportage of 1995. There must indeed be something about loving to hate the French.

Atavism alone, however, cannot explain why the rage got so much out of proportion. Rationalising the phenomenon by means of historical, political or even philosophical explanations is not really

satisfactory, as it addresses the symptoms but does not diagnose the actual complaint. With hindsight, this sudden epidemic of Frog-bashing, described by one commentator as “by God, satisfying,”¹⁹ appears very much as a giant carnival, in which the Australian nation gave vent to pent-up, deeply buried tensions. The real nature of these tensions remains to be uncovered, but presumably it had very little to do with France as such. Like any carnival, it was fun — one could transgress the usual limits without facing serious consequences. But transgressing the usual limits may reveal one’s ugliest impulses, and the spectacle of a hateful, racist, jingoistic Australia was not a pretty sight by anyone’s standards. Picking on innocent poodles is hardly a feat of gallantry.

The more or less unconscious appreciation that there would be few consequences to attacking the “arrogant” French government proved only too accurate, as the Australian anti-French hysteria went almost unnoticed in France. While the Australian media went overboard, their French colleagues, on the other hand, made scant mention of the reactions to French nuclear testing abroad in general, let alone in Australia. This applies even to newspapers like *Libération* and *Le Monde*, which were critical of the government’s stubbornness in the face of world-wide condemnation and which pointed out the damage to France’s standing. Only the right-wing, pro-government *Le Figaro* reported the bomb attack on the French Consulate in Perth on 17 June, for example.

Isolated reports of the events in Australia only reached some sections of the French public later, in a somewhat roundabout way, when the Australian political class, under public pressure and with an election pending, attempted to exploit the electoral value of the anti-testing campaign. John Howard opportunistically demanded stronger measures against France. The Keating government,

seeking to retain the political initiative, launched a war of words with their French counterparts, with each side calling the other "silly," "stupid," and much worse. Keating hammered out criticisms of French colonialism in New Caledonia, while Chirac accused Australia of racism and of an ultimate strategy of pushing France out of the Pacific by "orchestrating" public protest at home, and so on.

In the meantime, his colourful anti-French statements notwithstanding, Paul Keating carefully avoided taking any measures that could prove harmful for Australia, such as employing trade sanctions that would have violated WTO regulations. Generally speaking, the Australian government sought to focus the attack on the testing itself, rather than onto France and the French people. Nevertheless, its failure to override certain union initiatives — in particular, the postal workers' refusal to deliver mail or service telephones at French consulates, which was in breach of diplomatic privileges under the Vienna Convention — gave France a valid grievance and an opportunity to undermine the anti-nuclear campaign's legitimacy.

There are few occasions in peacetime when public opinion is so deeply aroused over external policy that a government must take notice. In this case, the public led on the issue for several months, and the government was forced to follow, doing its best to avoid both serious diplomatic damage and alienation from public opinion. If the French conservative government undoubtedly underestimated the impact of its decision both nationally and internationally, it was also unquestionably the case that the Australian government misjudged the strength of popular reaction in Australia and was forced to shift to a more strident position than originally intended. This may have helped persuade France to

reduce the number of planned tests from eight to six, but Australia was by no means a lone voice.

Quite apart from its regrettable excesses, the 1995-96 episode, in particular its perception as reflected in the two countries' respective media, was particularly interesting in that it reflected the imbalance in Franco-Australian bilateral relations.

Generally speaking, France receives more coverage in the Australian media than Australia does in the French media. If Australia continues to perceive France as a fairly difficult country to deal with, Australia is still perceived by France as a small, distant country and as a junior partner. Indeed, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade regrets the fact that top-level political contacts between the two countries are so rare. Moreover, French official visitors to Australia are generally more junior than Australian visitors to France: until 2000, the most senior recent visitor to France was Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in 1996, while the most recent senior visitor to Australia was the Secretary of State for the French Overseas Territories, Jean-Jack Queyranne, in 1997. Alexander Downer was in France on a short working visit from 30 January to 1 February 2000. John Howard also visited France in April this year, but there are no plans for a visit by French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the Australian foreign minister's visit received next to no coverage in the French press. John Howard was more fortunate, as pictures of the ceremonies at the Villers-Bretonneux Australian War Memorial were duly broadcast on all nationwide television channels. The few shots shown of the inauguration of the "Promenade d'Australie" on the banks of the Seine, however, had more to do with the presence of the controversial Mayor of Paris, Jean Tibéri, than with that of his distinguished guest. . .

Fruitful co-operation does exist between the two countries, however, especially in the military sphere (famine relief, surveillance, search and rescue, and fishing patrols), and in the fields of culture and scientific research. But trade exchanges remain relatively modest; France ranked only twenty-fourth among Australian export markets in 1998, for example. Bilateral investments are on the increase, but French business has yet to fully recognise Australia's potential as a springboard to Asian markets.

The forthcoming Sydney Olympics have already contributed to putting Australia on French maps, and there is undoubtedly an increasing awareness of what the country may have to offer. But knowledge of Australia is still limited in France, even if Australia does have a positive image of a young, dynamic nation — occasionally beating the French at rugby and tennis cup finals.

Relations between France and Australia have warmed up since the end of nuclear testing and the settlement of the New Caledonian and GATT questions. Much remains to be done, however. The reinforcement of bilateral relations between France and Australia can only be achieved through improving the knowledge that the two countries have of one another. A little education and goodwill on both sides should overcome the mutual misunderstandings that may persist.

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ENDNOTES

¹ It was also, of course, a highly contentious issue in New Zealand and other Pacific states.

² Speech by Mr Jean-Jack Queyranne, Secretary of State for French Overseas Territories, at the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, Monday 14 June 1999, Communiqué de Presse du Secrétariat d'État à l'Outre-mer, <http://www.outre-mer.gouv.fr//actu/cp/1999/0610cp-2.htm>

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 November 1853.

⁴ *PIM*, January 1990, p. 10.

⁵ Only Papua New Guinea's population exceeds one million.

⁶ See *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1971 edition): 'metropole 4: MOTHER COUNTRY – compare METROPOLIS'; 'metropolis 2: the mother city or state of a colony (as of Ancient Greece): MOTHER COUNTRY.'

⁷ Speech at the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Canberra, April 1987, quoted in Jean CHESNAUX & Nic MACLELLAN, *La France dans le Pacifique, de Bougainville à Mururoa*, Éditions de la Découverte (Essais), Paris, 1992, p. 112.

⁸ Ean HIGGINS, *The Australian*, 23-24 Sept. 1995.

⁹ Quoted in Alban BENSA, *Chroniques kanak – L'Ethnologie en marche*, Ethnies-Documents, Paris, 1995, p. 117.

¹⁰ *Souvenir de la Nouvelle Calédonie. L'Insurrection canaque*, Calman-Lévy, Paris, 1881, quoted in Alban BENSA, *ibid.*, p. 116.

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¹² See Nic MACLELLAN & Jean CHESNAUX, *After Mururoa, France in the South Pacific*, Ocean Press, Melbourne, 1998.

¹³ François MITTERRAND, *Réflexions sur la Politique extérieure de la France*, Fayard, Paris, 1996, p. 34.

¹⁴ *Australian Financial Review*, 10 August 1995.

¹⁵ Incident reported by Glen ST JOHN BARCLAY in 'Problems in Australian Foreign Policy, January-June 1995', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 41, No 3, 1995, p. 353.

¹⁶ *Advertiser*, 19 June 1995.

¹⁷ *The Age*, 17 June, 1996.

¹⁸ *The Australian*, 18 August, 1995.

¹⁹ *The Advertiser*, 17 June, 1995.

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